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RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Written statement submitted by International Educational Development, Inc., a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[20 February 1995]

Psychological problems of children in the war in Croatia*

1. Children who grow up in war zones are exposed to an extremely high risk of mental disorders. Simultaneously they face two highly demanding processes: the process of growing up and the process of confronting numerous war-inflicted losses and traumas. The children in their growing up period are unable to apply various compensatory mechanisms aimed at helping to deal with traumatic experiences. At the same time, they have to confront previously unknown situations: the changing relations within the family and with neighbours, their friends have become their enemies and, finally, their home does not belong to them any more.

* The statement uses data from the Children's Rights Commission of the Office for Victims of War in Croatia.

2. The loss of home is an extremely frustrating factor for a child, because it is of vital importance in creating self-identity. Children's sketches, short stories, diaries, etc. reveal how badly children take the loss of home. Furthermore, its loss is connected to numerous other losses: the change in the way of living, separation from friends and other important people in their lives, the loss of pets and other things essential for a normal growing-up process.

3. Living with stress-affected parents is another problem. A parent who finds it difficult to live in new living conditions is not only unable to give appropriate support to a child, but often is either aggressive or depressed and thus inflicts additional stress on a child.

4. The separation of family members is a further emotional loss, because it changes the structure of a family. It has been observed that children aged from 12 to 14 years assume the responsibility for a whole family (usually they assume the role of the father). The children of missing persons are in an extremely difficult situation, because there is constant mourning in such a family.

5. The accumulation of a number of lasting stressful situations impairs a child's ability to adapt to a new environment. Numerous researches, based on different methodologies, point out the average psychological profile of such children.

6. The most extensive research on the psychological impact of war on children was done within the scope of the UNICEF project "Psychological and educational assistance to war-affected students". Five thousand elementary schoolchildren throughout Croatia were included in this research. The results showed out that, of 25 possible traumatic war events, there was an average of 7 experienced by each child. The most common ones were exile and separation of family members, indirect personal threats (air raids, shooting, extended stays in shelters), threats to family members, witnessing acts of killing and injuring, and, finally, direct personal threats. The study of stress experience showed that, in relation to stress reactions expressed, 35 per cent of the exiled children and 18.5 per cent of children living in crisis areas but who had not been exiled had a high risk of mental disorders.

7. The programme aimed at pre-school children entitled "Psycho-educational assistance to exiled and refugee children of pre-school age, their parents and kindergarten teachers" covered 1,874 exiled and refugee children between the ages of three and six. Traumatic experiences ranged from the loss of property in 84 per cent of cases, direct experiencing of war trauma in 54 per cent of cases, traumatic experiences in exile in 23 per cent of cases, the death of a close person in 18 per cent of cases, the imprisonment of a close person in 16 per cent of cases, starvation in 14 per cent of cases, injuries in 13 per cent of cases. Around 40 per cent of the examined sample live in refugee shelters and hotels, and the remaining 60 per cent are accommodated elsewhere.

8. A cross-section of 125 schoolchildren in a refugee camp, according to data supplied by their mothers, showed that 28 per cent of them had lost their appetite, 20 per cent suffered from sleeping disturbances, 13.6 per cent had nightmares, 20 per cent had become obstinate, 16 per cent aggressive and 9 per cent hyperactive.

9. Although the studies were methodologically differently constructed, they all indicate a high level of risk of mental disorders in children in Croatia, due to being exposed to war conditions. A special emphasis should be placed on traumatized children who belong to a high-risk group. They are the children of the killed, the children of one missing parent, the injured children and the permanently disabled children living in exile. Cumulatively, the exiled children have experienced a higher number of traumatic situations. Emotional problems are predominantly represented by mood changes with dominant irritation spells and a lowered control ability, followed by fear of separation, depression, crying outbursts, the feeling of guilt and emotional dullness.

10. Social problems include the need to attract attention, aggressiveness, negativism, hyperactivity and a lack of self-reliance. From the field of thinking, perception and memory, strong visualizations are most common, followed by distracted attention, poor concentration, cognitive problems and confusion. Psycho-physical problems include disturbances in sleeping, eating and speaking and various types of pains, etc.

11. Based on all documented data, which are still not complete and final, it can be concluded that children experienced the following tragedies during the war in the Republic of Croatia in the period between May 1991 and April 1994:

248 were killed;

52 are missing;

901 were wounded (86 permanently disabled);

4,273 lost one parent;

54 lost both parents;

936 children whose parents are missing or imprisoned;

528 educational institutions were destroyed or damaged (128 kindergartens, 335 elementary schools and 65 high schools and dormitories);

16 institutions of social welfare were destroyed or damaged (8 children's homes, 3 youth reform homes and 5 homes for rehabilitation of handicapped children);

29 children's health institutions were destroyed or damaged (15 hospitals and 14 other health institutions).

12. In the period between 10 October 1991 and 24 December 1991, 172,268 children were registered as exiled. Thanks to the suspension of war operations some children returned to their homes and there were 71,976 exiled children registered on 27 April 1994. However, not all children have been registered so that, according to the data provided by UNICEF and UNHCR, there were 73,076 exiled children in the Republic of Croatia on 12 April 1994. Of the total number of exiled children, 6,725 were evacuated to foreign countries. After the last official evidence of exiles of 15 July 1994, 190,816 exiles were registered of whom 44,915 were children.

13. These figures clearly suggest that children were particular victims of the aggression against Croatia. In view of the age of the population involved, further problems can be expected resulting from the impact of war on the growth and development of children.

14. The Children's Rights Commission, working on gathering and analysing these data, wishes to inform all organizations and individuals worldwide, members of the international community, and especially the Committee on the Rights of the Child about the flagrant violation of children's basic rights in Europe at the end of the twentieth century. It also expects condemnation of such acts and international intervention in offering help to children.